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ABSTRACT

The role of state college trustees and their interaction with state government are considered. It is suggested that the trustee should be concerned about what is best for postsecondary education in the state generally as well as for the specific institution. The future trends indicate declining college enrollments, which require planning strategies by governing boards. If trustees do not face the fact of a declining demand for their services, state government may step in to make such decisions. Actions to increase enrollments that could have adverse consequences include: offering scholarships based on some criteria other than financial need, creating new programs or offering old programs at new locations (regardless of demonstrated need), lowering tuitions (or not raising them when indicated), or lowering admissions or graduation standards. It is claimed that these actions will cast doubt on the reputation of public postsecondary education among state policy-makers, and they might hasten the transfer of the locus of power from the campus to the capitol. The net effect of most of the actions would be to increase the price for those already enrolled or likely to be enrolled, and the price will be paid chiefly by the taxpayers of the state. Possible strategies that trustees should consider include the following: undertaking contingency plans, one dealing with a projected decline in enrollments of 5 percent over the next ten years and another based on a decline of 15 percent; promoting cooperative degree programs; increasing part-time adult enrollments; providing adult education by television through cooperation with other colleges; and establishing recruitment centers throughout the state in cooperation with other institutions. It is emphasized that trustees should view themselves as trustees of the public interest and not just of a particular institution. (SW)

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THE PUBLIC TRUSTEE: OSTRICH, MULE OR OWL?

It is a pleasure to be here at the invitation of the Education Commission of the States, and the Association of Governing Boards, and to address you on the subject of the relationship between public colleges and universities on the one hand and State government on the other.

It is a particular pleasure to note among the audience my former colleague, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, George Weathersby. George, as at least the Hoosiers among you know, has recently left Harvard to become the new Commissioner of Higher Education for the state of Indiana. We overlapped at Harvard by only six months; but I saw enough of him in that brief time to know that he will be sorely missed by faculty and students alike. But, believing as I do in the importance of two-way traffic between academic and the real world, I cannot begrudge his leaving. And I know that he will do an effective job for the state in which my father was born and spent the first 45 years of his life.

I don't know how seriously you should take my views about the responsibilities of public trustees. Perhaps it will help you to reach some conclusion on that point if I tell you a story about my first meeting as an ex-officio member of the Board of Trustees of the Pennsylvania State University.

The Trustees were apprehensive about my appearance in their midst. I had been the somewhat unorthodox choice of a somewhat unorthodox governor to be Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In that capacity I was not only the Chief Executive Officer of the fourteen state colleges but an ex-officio trustee of Penn State, Temple and Pitt.

The apprehensions of my colleagues were exacerbated rather than put to rest when at my first meeting I joined those who were trying to unseat the Chairman of the Board. (I might add that we lost - in fact I can't ever remember having won any major battle on the Penn State board in the five years I served.)

What startled my colleagues was not that we lost but that we even tried. Penn State trustee meetings had, until then, been rather cut and dried affairs. The Board has until recently been run by a small executive committee dominated by the Pennsylvania Manufacturers Association. It had been difficult at times to know whether Penn State was the intellectual wing of the Republican Party, or the Republican Party was the political wing of Penn State.

So the Board and its staff were quite unprepared for a contested election. There were practical difficulties. Yellow tablets had to be torn up to make ballots; secretaries scurried about finding pencils for those who lacked them; and there were questions about who should count the vote.

All of this created serious tension in a group where tension had previously been limited to worrying about whether they would get to Beaver Stadium in time for kick-off. I decided that it would be in order to try to relieve the strain while the Committee was outside counting ballots.

The President of the University had announced earlier in the meeting that the Japanese Olympic Gymnastic Team would compete against Penn State in the near future, and that we were all cordially invited. I raised my hand on a point of information. Was the President aware, I asked, that an equally important athletic event would take place the following Sunday? He looked puzzled. I pointed out that the Franklin and Marshall College Squash Team

coached by the Secretary of Education, would play the Penn State Squash Club (I noted that although Penn State spends two million dollars a year on its football team, it cannot seem to afford a varsity squash team, although they have twenty courts). I added that the Secretary of Education would be playing number seven for Franklin and Marshall College.

I went a little further. I said that I was a sporting man, as I knew the President was, and that I would be willing to make a small wager on the outcome: namely, that if Penn State won the match I would add a million dollars to its budget and if they lost I would take a million away.

There was a long silence, and then one of the octogenarian aggie trustees turned to his neighbor, who was hard of hearing, and said, in a voice that could be heard by everyone in the room: "My God, he's just as crazy as they said he was."

The ensuing laughter did, in fact, relieve the tension a bit, although I am not sure that it was helpful in persuading my fellow trustees of the weightiness of my views.

My assignment here this evening is to discuss with you how the trustees of public colleges and universities can work more effectively with state government. In practice I suppose that means how you work with three quite different groups of people who together constitute the policy-making authorities at the state level: namely, Governors and their budget staffs; legislators and their staffs; and the increasingly numerous coordinating boards for higher education.

But the more I thought about this assignment, the more I was driven to conclude that I couldn't undertake to do what you had asked me to do without

first saying something about the role of a public college or university trustee.

The problem is not so simple as in the case of the private college or university trustee. Put simply, that duty is to further the long-range interests of the institution. The application of that standard to particular situations may be difficult - but the standard itself is one that can be easily grasped.

The role of a public college or university trustee is not, I think, so easily defined. I do not think, for example, that the role of a trustee of Penn State can be discussed entirely in terms of the future of Penn State. Instead, we should think about that role in terms of what is best for post-secondary education in the state generally. Penn State is only a part - though a very important part - of that picture. Why is this the case?

First, because you are spending public money. And what the public wants, as expressed by the Governor and the Legislators to whom they have for the time being entrusted these decisions, is a system serving the needs of the entire state as efficiently and as effectively as possible.

In saying this I am glossing over some difficulties. For example, Governors and Coordinating Boards will most likely be thinking in terms of the state as a whole; Legislators, for reasons which are immediately apparent and not in any way blameworthy, tend to be more parochial in their concerns. But even these differences should not be exaggerated. As budgets get tighter, and the need for new construction diminishes, even legislators are increasingly interested in cost-effective ways of satisfying the need for post-secondary education.

The second basic reason why your role must be described in terms of the public interest rather than simply in terms of the survival of your own college or university is a very practical one. At a time of declining enrollments and declining real resources, any other policy will be self-defeating. That is, if each college or university within a particular state adopts the policy of "every school for itself, and the Devil take the hind-most", the result in the State Capitol is likely to be a heightened contempt for public higher education, followed by a decision that public boards of trustees are too insular to be trusted with major policy.

I am not telling you anything you do not already know when I say that post-secondary education is not getting the kind of automatic support from governors and legislators that it got ten or fifteen years ago. The reasons are clear, and most of them cannot be changed or affected in any major way by any of us who are in this room tonight. They include increasing competition for public tax dollars from other areas of society; lingering resentments against the student generation, an unhappy legacy of the late 1960's; declining enrollments, which tempt those who run for a public office and who must count votes to take a less benign view of the needs of public education; and the worsening job prospects for college graduates over the last several years.

These are tendencies over which you and your colleagues have very little, if any, control. Together they operate to persuade state policy makers that public higher education has lower priority today than they might have accorded it in the 1950's and the 1960's. If on top of these aggravations you add a further one - a scene in which everyone seems intent on grabbing a bigger share of a declining pie -- then I think you are inviting governors and

and legislators and coordinating boards to move in and to make decisions which all of us would prefer to see made on the individual campus.

Centralization may be a bad thing. I am continually reading statements by college presidents and the Carnegie Commission and others lamenting the increasing tendency of the states to remove important decisions from the campus to the State Capitol. But I must tell you that the ancient plea - "give us our money and leave us alone" - won't work anymore. Policy makers at the state level are going to insist that you run Ball State or Eastern Michigan or Bowling Green or Southern Illinois in the public interest - and if you won't, they will.

Now what do I mean to convey in using the phrase "the public interest?" I think I can best illustrate my meaning by talking about a particular problem - one which I trust you all understand to be a problem so that we need not debate its existence.

I am referring to the fact of stable and in the years immediately to come declining enrollments.

There is plenty of room to debate the steepness of the slope of the decline. No one can be sure whether in any particular state the overall decline measured in fulltime equivalent students will be 5% or 10% or, as I think will sometimes be the case, 15% or 20%. Nor can anyone be quite sure how the statewide decline will affect any particular institution, because if there is one thing we can be sure of, it is that they will not all be affected the same way.

But when all of that has been said it remains the fact that there are probably very few public colleges or universities in these four states that do not face some decline in overall enrollments over the next ten years.

That being the case, the all-important question is quite simply this. How will you, as governing boards, respond to that prospect?

It seems to me that three responses are possible and that the first two will lead directly, and I might add deservedly, to the emasculation of your powers and responsibilities.

One response, of course, is to bury your heads in the sand, while singing "it ain't necessarily so." That will be a popular response in some quarters. It will be especially popular with faculty, who don't wish to face the fact of a declining demand for their services, and with some presidents, who simply don't want the hard work and the nasty decisions that are involved in a more intelligent response. But that kind of a response will be seen by all of the actors in the State Capitol - by governors, legislators and coordinating boards - as an abdication of your duties.

A second possible response to the threat of declining enrollments is to grit your teeth, plant your feet and determine that your institution is going to garner an increasing share of the decreasing supply of students.

What steps might a college or university take in pursuit of this objective?

One obvious one - and I see increasing signs of its use - is the reversion to scholarships based on something other than financial need. Scholarships of that sort were relatively common thirty or forty years ago. Sometime after World War II something close to a consensus developed in the effect that scholarships should not be given to young men and women who were able to pay all or a substantial portion of the cost of their own educations.

Athletic scholarships, of course, continued to be an unhappy exception to this general principle. But it was clearly recognized that they were an exception. Now we are seeing a revival of "no need" scholarships that are being used quite simply as a recruiting device. They are not bringing to college people who would not otherwise be there; to the extent that they have any effect at all they are simply shifting students from college A to college B.

A second tactic involves the creation of new programs or the carrying out of old programs at new locations, or both. These will be undertaken whether or not they are needed in terms of the interests of the state as a whole. A college will decide that the field of business administration is one that it ought to get into, because it is a way of attracting or keeping students, not because the state needs more people trained in management or sales or accounting. Or it will decide that a particular community is not being adequately served, and will discover in its charter or enabling legislation a mandate to serve those needs. In some states, coordinating boards now make expansionist policies difficult if not impossible to pursue.

A third tactic that I think we can expect to see from institutions following this second strategy is that of lowering tuitions; or, to put the matter more realistically, failing to raise tuitions when all indications are that they should be raised. This, of course, will be a popular policy with many groups - with students and their parents and with groups like the labor unions who have historically been opposed to higher tuition in the public sector.

A fourth tactic, and one that raises somewhat more complex issues, will be the attempt to lower standards in order to bring more fish in with each catch. This in turn may take two quite different forms - lowering the standards for admission on the one hand, or lowering the standards for graduation on the other. I have a fairly relaxed point of view about lower standards for admission. My own personal view is that if young people want to pursue a formal education beyond high school, and if society seems unable to provide them with any very sensible alternatives in the form of paid employment, there is no great harm and possibly even benefit in their being permitted to follow their inclinations. I point out in passing, however, that the adoption of this tactic may have very serious implications for the curriculum, for the way you teach and for the kinds of supplementary services that need to be provided - questions which I am afraid are not always addressed when a college makes a decision to lower the net a little more deeply into the sea.

I have somewhat more hostile feelings about lowering the standards for graduation. It is one thing to say "come, we will give you a chance to prove that you can do college work." It is quite another thing to say - and I am afraid an increasing number of both public and private colleges are saying it -- "come, and we will not throw you out unless you commit a felony, and perhaps not even then." I understand the pressures. If tuition is $1000 a year then every 13 students who flunk out represent the salary of a beginning assistant professor. And yet we must continue to make some effort to enforce standards of graduation if we are not to forfeit our remaining public esteem.

These are some of the tactics which will be adopted and in some cases are being adopted by both private and public institutions in an effort to survive at enrollment levels which do not inflict painful decisions. But I think I can assure you that these tactics, when they are known and understood, will do nothing to enhance the reputation of public post-secondary education among state policy makers. In fact they will simply hasten the transfer of the locus of power from the campus to the Capitol. Why? Because the net effect of most of these decisions (especially those relating to scholarships and tuition) will not be to improve the quality or even the numbers of people being served; it will simply be to bid up the price of those who are already enrolled or likely to be enrolled. And since that price is being paid chiefly, though not entirely, by the taxpayers of your various states, people who are untimately responsible to taxpayers - Governors and legislators - are not going to put up with it for very long. There is another quite different approach which the trustees of a public institution might make to the prospect of declining enrollments. You might say to yourselves - and if the President doesn't say it to you, you ought to say it to him - since we know that there will be a decline but we do not know its magnitude, why don't we make some contingency plans? You might, for example, instruct your President to put before you two different plans, one dealing with a projected decline in FTE enrollments of 5% over the next ten years and another based on a more serious decline of 15%. You would hope for the one, but you would be prepared for the other. You would ask the President to inform the board what steps the administration proposes to take in each of these cases with respect to academic programs; with respect to staff; with respect to buildings; and with

respect to the other major variables which any college or university has to consider. That sort of planning would win you plaudits in the Capitol. It would tend to assure Governors and legislators and coordinating boards that you understand the public interest.

Other possibilities spring to mind. You ought to be promoting cooperative degree programs. George Weathersbee has described to me a very interesting one in Indiana involving, if I understand it correctly, undergraduate colleges, the medical schools and the hospitals. The effort here is to minimize the capital investment in very expensive technologies by splitting the medical curriculum into those parts which can be handled by colleges with reasonably good laboratory facilities; those parts of the curriculum which represent essentially practicum and can be handled in the field; and, finally, those irreducible parts of the curriculum which can only be dealt with in a modern highly equipped teaching hospital. That strikes me as an imaginative and cost-effective effort. I am sure, incidently, that there are many others like it in Ohio and Michigan and Illinois which I just happen not to know about.

I will give you quite a different example from my own experience in Pennsylvania. About ten years ago a number of small colleges, both public and private, became aware of increasing student interest in environmental studies in general and in marine biology and oceanography in particular. A college of one thousand students cannot develop a faculty and facilities in such a relatively specialized field. And so a group of them formed a consortion which now operates two marine biology stations, one at Lewes in Delaware and the other at Wallop's Island off the Atlantic coast of Virginia. Together they are providing, at a relatively modest cost to each school, field

experiences for their students and research possibilities for their faculty in a very dynamic area of the sciences.

Another illustration of a small cooperative venture of a different sort. Five years ago I established a program in Harrisburg involving undergraduates from the 14 state colleges who spent a four-month internship working in some relevant office of state government. They receive full academic credit for the semester, which involves papers and a Thursday night seminar as well as a full-time job. This was a program which none of the colleges could have set up themselves, but which from the point of view of each of them made sense even if only for a very small number of students (we varied between 35 and 50 each semester).

On a larger scale it is clear to all of us that some of the loss of full-time enrollments in the 17-22 year old bracket can be made up from part-time adult enrollments. Some, but not all. I can think of two steps which public colleges and universities could take cooperatively to encourage such enrollments.

Much of adult education ought to be by way of television. Very little of it is. That has something to do with the relative unavailability of channels, at least until recently, but more to do with the expense. Few individual institutions can afford the amount of money that goes into the preparation of a 20-class course in organic chemistry via television; most ETV hasn't gotten beyond the camera and professor phase. But there is no reason why colleges and universities could not pool their resources to do this, sharing the resulting revenues. In fact, I am inclined to think a

state legislature would look favorably upon that sort of joint enterprise.

If we are to increase the number of adults who are benefiting from public post-secondary education, we must go out and actively recruit them. In the long run this probably involves counseling centers in the major population areas of the state, tied by computer terminals to a central office and to the institutions themselves. But no single college or university should attempt a network of such centers, not only because they can't afford it, but more particularly because they cannot afford the apparent lack of objectivity which would go with such a center being associated with a particular institution. But a network of centers manned by people who belonged, not to any single college or university, but to the system as a whole, would have, I think, a much higher degree of credibility. Out of their activities might come a very substantial increase in the number of part-time enrollments in both conventional and unconventional programs.

I have attempted to analyze three different ways in which public boards of trustees might approach a single problem. I have characterized two of them as stupid and likely to lead in the long run to much greater state control of educational policy then even now exists. The third, I think, if pursued diligently can have a happier outcome - not infinite resources, but resources reasonably related to the obligations which you have undertaken.

I have two further caveats. If you are to perform this kind of role with respect to the state -- that is, if you were going to see yourselves

as trustees of the public interest and not just of your own college or university -- you are going to have to change in two important ways the kind of thinking that dominated the Boards of Trustees that I was a member of.

One has to do with the relative subordination of the trustees to the Chief Executive Officer of the university. The members of the Penn State Board thought of their job as a very simple one. It was to select the right President and then to do whatever he told them needed doing. From what I have said so far you will already have concluded that -- in my opinion, anyway -- that is not today an adequate definition of the role of a public trustee. The job I am asking you to do is more difficult. It involves asking the President some tough questions and pressing him for some hard answers. If you are not comfortable in that role I think you should seriously ask yourself whether you ought to continue as a trustee of a public institution at a time of scarce resources and declining enrollments.

A second awkwardness has to do with the relationship between Trustees on the one hand and the campus and the body of alumni on the other. If what I have said means anything, it means that occasionally you will be put in the awkward position of having to decide between the particular interests of your college or university on the one hand and the larger interests of the state on the other. I have suggested only that you should not make that decision automatically in favor of your own campus.

A decision in the public interest may make you unpopular in certain quarters. But that is why you are a trustee. That is why we have put people in charge of our colleges and universities who are not elected by the people, who serve relatively long overlapping terms and who are responsible ultimately only to the appointing authority and to their own consciences. We have chosen to do that, I think, because in some dim way we have understood that the long-range health of public post-secondary education requires unpopular decisions. If that were not the case we would have contrived a very different system of governance.

I happen to think that the theory of trusteeship which I have just outlined is the correct one; but I also think that past reality is very different from my theory. I think that most of the time most public college and university trustees have had before them only the long-range interest of the college or university on whose board they serve. That may have been an adequate standard in times of plenty. It clearly will not do in times of scarcity. Unless trustees can learn, however painful it may be, to take into account the larger picture, it may well be the decision of governors and legislators, not very far down the pike, that the present system of governance has outlived its usefulness.